



Level 3

Volume 15
Issue 3 February, 2021

Article 3

March 2021

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Recommended Citation

McGowan, Caroline (2021) "Care for some lunch? It's more than just food! Care, Commensality and Pedagogic Meals in Irish Primary Schools," *Level 3*: Vol. 15: Iss. 3, Article 3.

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/level3/vol15/iss3/3>

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Care for some lunch? It's more than just food!

Care, Commensality and Pedagogic Meals in Irish Primary Schools

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Abstract

This expository article addresses a lacuna in policy and practice literature around using primary school lunches as both a pedagogical opportunity and a space to expose children to social and cultural 'rituals' that model both care and food sharing as commensality. The article argues that policy literature in this space broadly tends to be concerned with a medicalised paradigm of nutrition, physical and cognitive development, and disease prevention, with scant regard for the impact that natural 'everyday' practices of eating and caring can have on enhancing encultured commensality, care and learning.

Key words: Commensality, Care, Food, Pedagogic Meals, the 'everyday'.

Lunch Box Envy

*On the other side of the classroom, she lifted the soft, crust-less, sandwich from the box;
Chicken and mayonnaise, thick white pan, completely divine;
Next the lid of the thermos is squeezed open, steam escapes, hot soup inside;
Now my turn, I don't need to look, cold tea, bread with butter - sometimes jam;
I bet she's not thinking about mine (Anonymous)*

1. Introduction

It is relatively easy to imagine the lunch scene depicted by the child in this poem. Watching on as the girl tucks into her packed lunch, one which seems abundantly more attractive to the writer. It brings about strong personal feelings, reactions and emotions for the child. On a deeper level issues related to social class, friendship, food, relationships, and care could be explored. *'Commensal relationships include whom one eats with and does not eat with, and eating food together brings with it a social map of roles, reference groups, status and social networks'*

(Persson Osowski, 2012, p.19). The foods contained within lunch boxes may illustrate complex and challenging aspects of family life including family constraints in terms of resources (time, money and knowledge) or lack of them (Morrison, 1996; Andersen *et al.*, 2015). A packed lunch may also act as a reminder of home and parents care and love. It can also provide a chance for children to have their individual tastes catered for. This in turn can provide opportunities for children to swap pieces from their lunch box in a 'gift exchange' process, which enhances the relationship and friendship (Andersen *et al.*, 2015). Simultaneously the lunch box referred to by Morrison (1996) as 'home in a box' can also expose children to mockery and be used as a mechanism of social division (Morrison, 1996). Whether it is a packed lunch or a hot/cold meal, school lunch is an everyday event and the most common lesson in the school (Finnish School Board as cited by Benn *et al.*, 2014).

Children's food culture is created and influenced through everyday food practices, at school, at home (Fitzgerald, 2010), through relationships with friends, siblings, relatives, grandparents (Jiang *et al.*, 2007; Roberts and Pettigrew, 2010; Curtis and Atkins, 2017), teachers, caregivers (Neary, 2012) parents (Hursti, 1999; Neary, 2012; Boni, 2015) marketing and media influences (Scaglioni, 2018; Esmaeilpour, 2018). Historically schools have been the target for interventions focused on health and social problems which are often related to food and poverty, and unfortunately today it is no different. Current policies addressing food and nutrition in schools are viewed in terms of health, future health and economic burden (Department of Health Ireland, 2016; Safefood, 2012).

2. Food in School

Children spend most of their waking time at school and eat at least one meal there every day. It may be brought from home or provided within the school. Commonly school lunch is eaten in the classroom (Benn *et al.*, 2014; Andersen *et al.*, 2015) with little attention to the manner in which food is eaten which is usually '*bare hands directly from the lunch box*' (Andersen *et al.* 2015, p.7).

Schools are often the focus of policies and initiatives, which are put in place to support and help young children with their eating habits, nutrition and health (EU Action Plan on Childhood Obesity 2014-2020, 2014; Zhang *et al.*, 2014). The rationale behind the first school meal scheme which was introduced in Ireland in urban areas in 1914 (The Education (Provision of Meals) Ireland Act) was children's health. In particular, it was out of concern for children who did not have access to adequate food (Buckley, 2018; The Irish Times, 1997). In the 'Ireland: Department of Local Government and Local Public Health Report 1928-1929' (pg 56) as cited by (Carney, 1985) it states that the meal varied between 'Irish stew and soup, cocoa, currant buns, bread, butter, margarine and jam'. The urban school meals scheme was further expanded in 1930 to include areas of the Gaeltacht and in 1975 to Dublin County Council areas (The Irish Times, 1997).

In Ireland today there are two schemes for school meals. The first is Urban School Meals Scheme for primary schools which is operated by the Local Authorities and part-funded by the Department of Social Protection (DSP). The second is the School Meals Local Projects Scheme which is funded directly by the DSP to primary and secondary schools, local groups and voluntary organisations which operate their own school meals projects (Department of Social Protection, 2020). The aim of the schemes is to provide nutritious food to school children so that they can take full advantage of the education provided to them with priority given to schools that are part of Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools' (DEIS). DEIS schools focus on addressing the 'educational' needs of children from disadvantage communities. However, although DEIS schools have 'access to' the programme it does not necessarily imply a 'right to', and all schools must apply for the scheme (DSP, 2020). Presently a Hot Schools Meal programmes is being piloted in a number of Irish schools as an anti-poverty measure under the DSP. Despite all the efforts to provide school meals to children in most need there has not been an evaluation of the school meals scheme by the Department. Without this it is not possible to determine if it is reaching disadvantaged children; having a positive impact; or how disadvantaged children are identified in non-DEIS schools/if all children in DEIS schools identify as disadvantaged (Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, 2014).

3. Changing Perspectives of Food and Childhood

'School meals are bound by their history: the food on offer and the way the meal is organised both reflect and build ideas about children, childhood, education, and society' (Sillanpää 2003 as cited by Ruckenstein, 2012, p.3).

Research conducted by Morrison (1996) in the mid-nineties also suggests that through food we may see the changing construction of childhood. Not unlike the continual evolution of the sociology of food studies (Neuman, 2018), the study of childhood has developed and changed through the years, from a view dominated by psychology and child development to a multi-disciplinary approach (children's rights, childhood agency, identity and belonging, and participation) with an emphasis on understanding the complexity of children's lives (Tatlow-Golden and Montgomery, 2020). According to James and James (2004) childhood is dependent on social, cultural and economic factors and can vary within cultures over time. The food we offer and the way which we organise it may in many ways be a reflection of how society values childhood, children and their education.

Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model of childhood illustrates how *'development is influenced by changing micro contexts, like family, friends and communities surrounding the child'* such as school, peers and health services (Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny, 2017, p.14). Bronfenbrenner also emphasised the importance of strong positive relationships which may have the capacity to negate the impacts of damaging environments using warmth and love (Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny, 2017). Where and how children give meaning to the word 'child/childhood' is first experienced at home, in their immediate environment, in school, and through the media (Adams, 2014). Research into food practices in families and school contexts by MacDonald (2015) highlights the need for acknowledging the relational nature of food and the way schools are concerned with nurturing, nourishing and controlling children's food.

4. The complexities of food and care

Inglis (2008) describes Ireland as a consumer capitalist society with liberal individualism attributed in the main to growth in the power of the media, changes in religion, and globalisation.

Ireland's constant pursuit of an economic model promotes inequality and leaves many without basic living standards such as food, housing, education and welfare (Hearne and McMahon, 2016). Currently, social policy is broadly derived from a linear model of economic growth and competitiveness in the first instance, as opposed to investing in social policy from the outset which can produce more sustainable economic development in the long-term (Considine and Dukelow, 2010). Lynch *et al.*, (2009) state that the capitalist view of people as moveable economic units undermines emotional well-being and care relationships, and that this is a form of 'affective injustice'. Lynch (2018) states that although **care** is not explicitly in politics it underpins all of it, meaning that public services are a way of showing care for citizens: public services like education, health and social services to name a few. Lynch argues that there is a critique of dependency in Irish society without the consideration that, in fact, it is endemic to the human condition, and we must appreciate the importance of understanding caring as an ethic - not in terms of market value. Murphy (2011) echoes Lynch's view that when care is reduced to an economic product as it is in a capitalist society where 'work ethic' is reified, it is separated from its social context, and its real value in human relations is lost.

'Care is an essential part of the process that enable children to become autonomous agents in themselves' (Ghirotto and Mazzoni, 2013, p.301) and so it is educating in itself to care about, take care of, care-give and care-receive. According to Abbots *et al.*, (2015) *care* and *food* interact in almost every space in our lives from health to home, work, school and beyond. They are both instinctive *and* learned in order to survive socially and biologically, described by Abbots *et al.*, (2015) as 'intimate and relational but also socially prescribed, constrained and enforced'. The way 'care' is defined at government level impacts society in all aspects of life including schools and public institutions (Abbots *et al.*, 2015). Decisions relating to 'good' and 'proper' (Abbots *et al.*, 2015) eating are visible in everyday government policies at family (Healthy Ireland, Safefood Ireland Start Campaign) and school level. Consider for instance: governmental - recommendations for healthy eating policies; centring on the concept of the food pyramid; schemes to remove junk food from schools; sugar tax; and 'no -fry zones'. Many of the interventions and strategies are determined by the heuristics of the governing classes and revolve around the idea of 'healthy' living when it comes to food practices (Pike and Leahy, 2017).

Both what we eat and what we care about, plays out in everyday food choices (Fischler, 2011). A few examples include 'choosing' organic or farmed, speciality dietary ingredients, food as medicine, environmentally friendly food-packaging, sustainability or basic necessities. Abbotts *et al.* (2015) ask the question '*Which social actors have the economic and cultural capital to consume in a 'caring' manner*' (Abbotts *et al.*, 2015 p.13). Bourdieu (2010, p.70) states '*the mode of acquisition is most marked in the ordinary choices of everyday existence, such as furniture, clothing or cooking, which are particularly revealing of deep-rooted and long-standing dispositions*'.

The definition of 'proper' or 'good' food is subjective depending on who defines it, as illustrated at governing levels and within the public health arena where concerns are about health and diet (what foods people should eat) while children on the other could see this quite differently (Benn and Carlsson, 2014, Abbotts *et al.*, 2015; Andersen *et al.*, 2015). Those who are financially restricted are at a disadvantage due to lack of access to shops providing affordable 'proper' healthy foods. Often poor individual choice is used to explain poor diet and lifestyle. However, poverty makes it extremely difficult to afford food with a limited budget and to access shops and supermarkets (Friel and Conlon, 2004; Manandhar *et al.*, 2006). Eating outside of the family unit is now more and more common, it is happening in school time, breakfast clubs and after-school care, and is central part of everyday life (Andersen *et al.*, 2015). Research into food practices in families and school contexts by MacDonald (2015) highlights the need for future public health approaches to be more sensitive to family contexts and constraints, for example time to allocate to food procurement, cooking and serving, food availability, and food affordability.

A 'proper' meal is not only about the food served, but also about the social aspects of a meal (Morrison, 1996). Food should not only be nutritious but also culturally acceptable and culturally appropriate (Healy, 2019). Research by Share and Hennessey (2017) revealed that many families living in emergency accommodation such as hotel rooms tried to ensure the room was made more comfortable and adapted it to suit their needs while eating. This is an example of how 'where one eats and with whom' is equally as important as what one eats and is 'imbued with feelings of worth and dignity'.

Practical tasks such as providing food and cooking that are part of everyday living are included in care work (Lynch, 2007; Van Esterik, 2015). Care work is not as simple as just looking after someone: it requires planning, organisation, and attentiveness along with practical tasks such as cooking, cleaning and playing with children (Lynch, 2007). Tronto (2013, p.2) claims that care work involves necessary 'dirty work' such as the cleaning and of preparing food. Families, and in particular women, who have to live in emergency accommodation do 'invisible' and 'disempowering' work of having to adapt their environments every day to produce food for their families (Share and Hennessey, 2017).

DEIS schools encounter and support children with the effects of lower socio-economic factors, such as issues with diet, care, health and hygiene. As stated by Courtney (2015), in more advantaged communities care needs are met within families and the community, whereas in disadvantaged communities the school often takes on this role which leaves less time for a more education-focused school experience. Some children attending DEIS schools are living in homeless accommodation and if a child has eaten in school it gives the parents/caregivers one less thing to worry about especially if there is limited access to food storage, cooking facilities or equipment (Share and Hennessey, 2017). Share and Hennessey (2017) further illustrate this point through their research with families in emergency accommodation. Families are forced to depend on convenience foods and to live in accommodation that is lacking in cooking facilities. This has a negative impact on the ability to practice and support positive food socialisation which has an overall impact on their health and wellbeing.

5. Building on the concept of care

'Nurture and commensality build from the concept of care' (Van Esterik, 1997). Researchers and scholars have defined commensality in different ways, and the idea of commensality is evolving and changing. Fischler (2011) defined commensality as 'eating at the same table', something which turns the basic, biological, everyday occurrence of eating food into a collective social experience, important to human social life. This does not necessarily imply eating the same food, however. Commensality is often discussed in relation to the family. Much research has talked

about the decline of the 'family meal' due to work and the reorganisation of everyday life (Morrison, 1996; Pike and Leahy, 2017; Fischler, 2011; Marovelli, 2018).

The family can be viewed as a social institution (Giddens and Sutton, 2010; Therborn, 2010; McDonald, 2014) which helps to shape people's lives, has the capacity to change over time (Giddens and Sutton, 2010) and where society is reproduced through the individual (McDonald, 2014). Connelly (2015) states that the family in Ireland is at the centre of social and political debate and has a pivotal role in public policy and decision-making for the common good of all citizens (Hanafin, 2008). Consequently, understanding families and how they are living their lives in a changing and rapidly globalised world, can help bring about an improved awareness of cultural and social life (Giddens and Sutton, 2010).

'The contemporary Irish family in a diverse society, comes in many different shapes and sizes. In modern-day Ireland, the concept of family has become an ever more inclusive one, and now it encompasses the many different forms that can make up a loving and supportive family unit' (Higgins, 2018).

Lima *et al* (2015) describes commensality as bringing people together to establish and fortify social relationships. In doing so people have the chance to exchange stories about everyday life and build social bonds. Commensality can be divided into two types: 'everyday' and 'special' (Kerner *et al.*, 2015). As eating goes beyond the primary biological need for food (Marovelli, 2018) and happens every day, it should be valued and cared about (Fischler, 2011). In parallel Gilligan (2000, 2003) also emphasises the importance of care and in providing positive experiences in the everyday lives of children and not just on occasions.

'The naturally occurring opportunities in daily living may ultimately prove more therapeutic than ones which are specially contrived or engineered. For example, a sensitively laid out and consistently managed primary school classroom, and a warm relationship with a responsive teacher, may do more for a child's craving for a 'secure base' than elaborate efforts around engaging a child in weekly one-hour sessions of therapy'. (Gilligan, 2000 p. 40).

The same message can be applied to food and commensality. The natural occurrence of everyday eating in schools affords the opportunity to build relationships, share, and support each other.

Fischler (2011) writes of the hearth and fire being the central element of social life (the circle of commensality), where everyone gathers together creating a circle around the fire and the food. This is commonly seen in 'table-less' cultures. Once again, how we serve food is brought into question, and is the *places* where we eat.

Van Esterik (1995) developed a conceptual framework for commensality in 1994 for a UNICEF workshop on care (Figure 1). The 'commensal circle' is described by Van Esterik as '*a place where people share food, eat together and feed each other*'. Van Esterik (1995) states that these circles start before a child is born and may include ancestral and spiritual elements. She speaks of embodied and encultured commensality.

The commensal circle at first is concerned with the mother and baby, titled 'Embodied commensality' it includes the first four circles of commensality:

1. *In utero*
2. Ritual pre-lactation feeds
3. Breastfeeding/breastmilk substitutes
4. Shared breastfeeding.

Here food sharing begins *in utero* between the mother and the baby. Before the child is born they become familiar with the tastes of the mother, and then the tastes of the household once the child is born.

Over time, there is a shift from co-regulation of appetite to self-regulation. This is where relational and emotional links to food are started (Van Esterik, 1995). Titled 'Encultured Commensality' the commensal circle states to radiate outward to include:

5. Shared food with siblings and other members family
6. Sharing food with community members
7. Feasts and political commensality
8. Sharing food with strangers/food aid.

It is culture that determines the food served and the manner in which it is served in household and public commensal circles (Van Esterik, 2015).

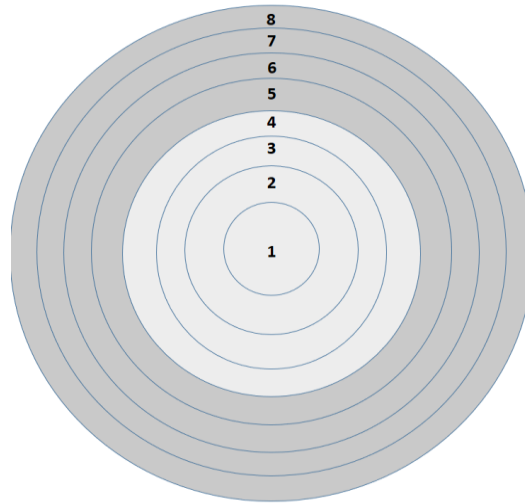


Figure 1 Envisioning the commensal circle (Kerner, 2015)

6. Connecting the lines between care and commensality

Considering the idea of commensality built from the concept of care, one may try to understand the connection between the two, and investigate them side by side. Using Lynch's Care-Full Model of the citizen (2007) to investigate the concept of care as '*endemic to our humanity*'. Lynch (2007) describes three main sites of caring relations as follows:

1. Primary caring which includes family, households and friendships. This is a place of high interdependency with high levels of intimacy and attachment. There are deep relations which are essential for existence.
2. Secondary caring (schools, other institutions). Here there is a lower interdependency, there may be attachment and care responsibilities. However, they are not as deep as at primary level and there is a degree of choice involved.

3. Tertiary caring (public bodies, food banks, campaigns for justice, fund raising). Here there is no intimacy involved and are based around solidarity as a social and political form of love (Lynch, 2007).

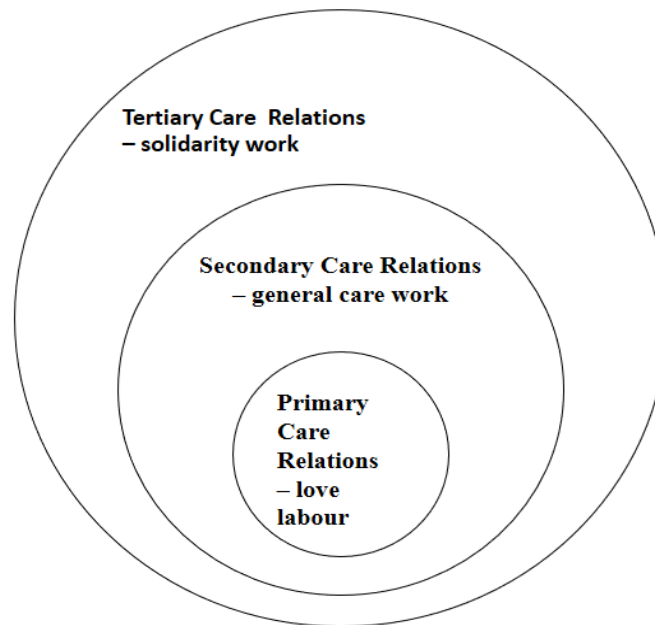


Figure 2: CARE-FULL Model of the Citizen (the affective domains) (Lynch, 2007)

Van Esterick's (1995) commensal circles and Lynch's (2017) CARE-FULL Model of the citizen, provide a good basis for exploring food, care and commensality in schools and what can be gained from this interaction.

7. Prepare, Share and Care - The Pedagogic Meal

In a society where nutritional information and a focus on the daily diet is extremely common, the idea that 'you are what you eat' is popular in the medicalisation of food. The dominant discourse of food as 'good' or 'bad' can create a challenge for children in the regulation of their everyday food practices (Welch *et al.*, 2012). For young children attending school, or in some cases preschool, this may be the first time they have encountered food outside of their homes and there may be many emotions attached to this (Morrison, 2016). They are moving further away

from their 'embodied commensality' and further into the arena of 'encultured commensality' (Van Esterik, 1995). They are also moving into the domain of secondary care relations (Lynch, 2007). While this move away from home can come with some trepidation, it allows the children to experiment with food without interfering in the private sphere of cultural family rituals (Morrison, 1996). As previously noted, school lunch is an everyday event and the most common lesson in school (Finnish School Board as cited by Benn *et al.*, 2014).

Research into the area of the 'pedagogic meal' has progressed in recent years (Persson Osowski, 2012; Benn and Carlsson, 2014; Pike and Leahy, 2017; Wallace, *et al.*, 2020). However, it is not entirely clear what constitutes a 'pedagogic meal' (Persson Osowski, 2012). In Sweden teachers are encouraged to eat with the children, and this is what is referred to as the 'pedagogic meal'. Eating with teachers and peers is expanding the commensal circle, sharing the same space and often the same food. The school meal becomes a collective act of commensal sharing and learning (Benn and Carlsson, 2014). It is through such collective actions that teachers can positively influence children (Donohoo, 2017).

This interaction between teacher and child during school meals is seen as an opportunity to teach children about food and healthy eating, and to enhance a calm positive meal environment. In this case the teachers are considered role models and are engaged in an '**edu-care**' approach during the lunch break (Persson Osowski, 2012). Bandura's theory of social learning places an emphasis on learning from others through observing their attitudes and behaviours (Cunningham *et al.*, 2007). Bandura believed that through the experiences provided by social modelling perceived self-efficacy is created and strengthened. Modelling alongside mastering experiences, social persuasion; and the alteration of negative interpretations of physical and emotional reactions help to strengthening people's belief that they have what it takes to succeed (Bandura, 1994). Within the 'edu-care' space of the 'pedagogic meal' the teacher's interaction is extremely important. Persson Osowski's (2012) research discovered three teacher roles in this regard: the sociable teacher, the educating teacher and the evasive teacher. The latter is less child-orientated and active than the others. Research by Benn and Carlson (2014) also emphasise the importance of the relationship between the teacher/person responsible for the food and the child during the

learning experience of the school meal, food 'Bildung'. The concept of 'Bildung' is based around being educated for 'self-decision, solidarity and co-decision'.

On the idea of sharing which is a core aspect within the commensal circle (Van Esterick, 1995) Ruckenstein (2012) notes that food shared between children and their carers supports childhood development on multiple levels including social, emotional and physical. Encouraging social and emotional development may provide children with tools to enhance learning, behaviour and life success (Durlak and Weissberg, 2011). Sharing meals goes beyond the traditional family circle (Marovelli, 2018; Persson Osowski, 2012) into everyday lives outside of the family among children and adults alike. Some children may not have the chance to sit at a table or eat with others (Lalli, 2017; Share and Hennessy, 2017) and therefore school may be the only place where they have the opportunity to do this. The practice of eating together in schools provides an opportunity for all children to interact and share with each other (Lalli, 2017). This interaction can help to develop communities of practice among the children and the whole school (Lalli, 2017) which can '*reflect and build ideas about children*' (Sillanpää 2003 as cited by Ruckenstein, 2012), for example the way restaurant is set up, how tables are arranged, the time given up for lunch and the atmosphere, can all contribute to enhancing social and learning opportunities for children (Lalli, 2017; Persson Osowski, 2012). Schools development of 'rich learning environments (Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny, 2017). For example, in the classroom, the kitchen, the restaurant and the playground can provide positive developmental experiences between a community of adults and children (Gilligan, 2003). Share and Hennessey (2019) advocate for providing authentic positive food experiences as an approach to teaching and learning.

Case study research from Benn and Carlsson (2014) found that some teachers considered school meals to be less about learning and education and more to do with school health policies and practices. However, the research participants noted that if there was greater involvement of the children in the organisation and planning of the school meal such as 'hands on' cooking in the kitchen, or helping in the dining space, this would provide more potential for social learning and ownership of the process. They also described the need for a prescribed curriculum to do so. Research into mealtimes by Harte *et al.*, (2019) described the mealtime experience as

'opportunities for children to construct a community of peers with their educators by sharing information, stories and occasionally their food'. Five themes emerged from the research which included rituals, learning moments, food preference development, socialisation, child agency and an emerging theme of culture and community of mealtimes. Rituals related to eating are about socialising, communicating, sharing and participating. In particular for children who are dealing with stress in their lives, rituals and routines can help them recover from this, providing a sense of security and safety (Gilligan, 2000).

8. Broadening the Concept of Commensality and the 'Pedagogic Meal'

The actual planning, preparation and clearing up after meals take more time and effort in social relationships than food sharing and commensality (Van Esterik, 1997). Research from Jönsson (2017) notes that, historically, meals have been commensal while cooking is often carried out in solitude, however changes are occurring in the way we live our everyday lives, and the domestic kitchen is described as 'the new melting pot' (Jönsson, 2017 p. 5). Marovelli (2018) states that *'commensality cannot be studied without linking what happens at the table to the dynamics occurring within the kitchen'*. The kitchen is a place where memories are created through sharing, involvement and participation in preparing a meal and closeness during meal preparation (Marovelli, 2018). Using this extension of the concept of commensality to include the kitchen environment, while underpinning this within Lynch's CARE-FULL Model of a citizen (2007) and Van Esterik's commensal circles (1995), this may provide a space within the school environment to provide a rich positive teaching and learning experience where relationships, intimacy and friendships enhance children's everyday lives.

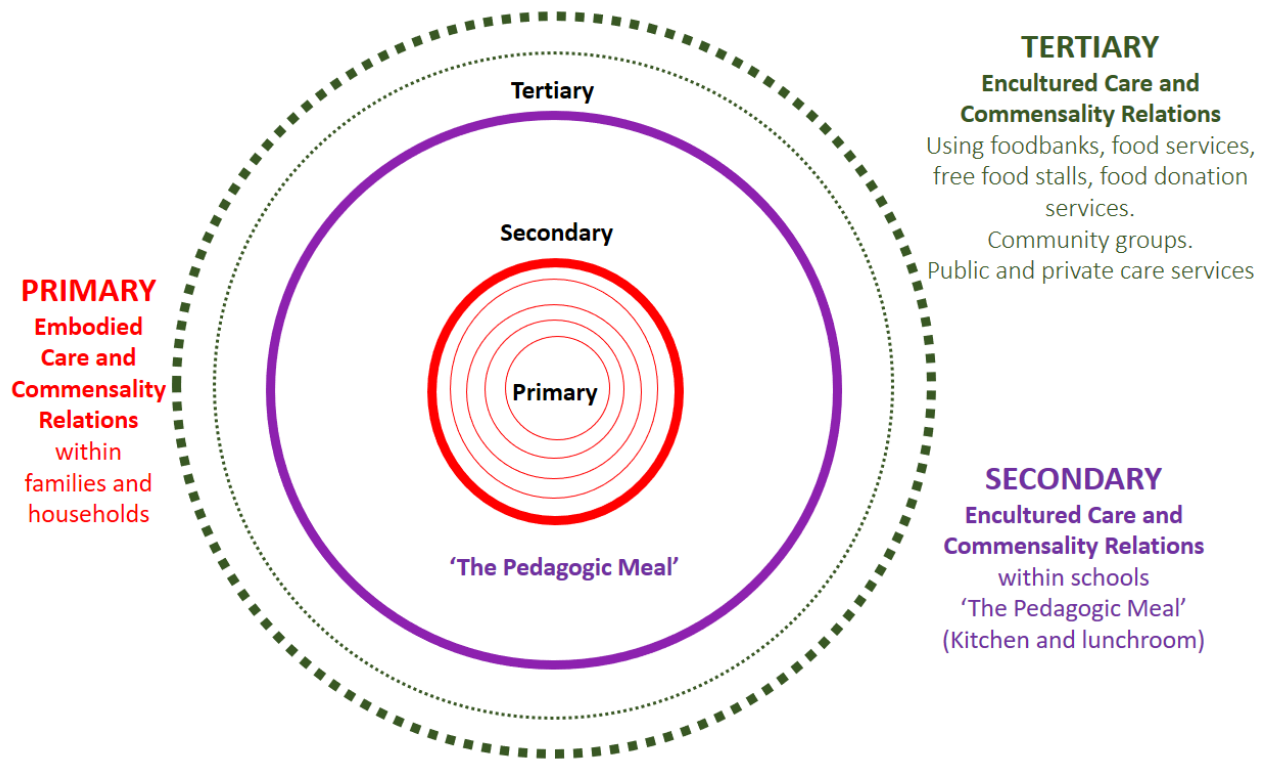


Figure 3 Envisioning the 'Pedagogic Meal' within Lynch's CARE-FULL Model of a citizen (2007) and Van Esterik's commensal circles (1995)

9. Envisioning the 'Pedagogic Meal'

Schools can cultivate and/or expand on primary care and commensality within the classroom environment. Figure 3 shows primary schools sitting in the space between home and the wider world. In schools, there are care responsibilities and opportunities to produce social values around education and food. The natural occurrences of 'everyday' eating in school within the context of the 'Pedagogic Meal' may afford opportunities to build relationships, pedagogical practices and a positive school culture to support children's learning, food socialisation and social and emotional wellbeing.

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